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Komulainen, Kauko Pekka

2020-03

Komulainen , K P , Sintonen , S , Kairavuori , S & Ojala , A 2020 , ' Approaching the renewed Finnish basic education curriculum as a potential and an option for aesthetics ' , Educare , vol. 2020 , no. 1 , pp. 34-52 . <https://doi.org/10.24834/educare.2020.1.3>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/313495>

<https://doi.org/10.24834/educare.2020.1.3>

unspecified

publishedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

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Please cite the original version.



doi: 10.24834/educare.2020.1.3

Approaching the renewed Finnish basic education curriculum as a potential and an option for aesthetics

Kauko Komulainen

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6736-3688>

kauko.komulainen@helsinki.fi

Sara Sintonen

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1157-0116>

sara.sintonen@helsinki.fi

Seija Kairavuori

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8957-3221>

seija.kairavuori@helsinki.fi

Aleksi Ojala

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2945-655X>

aleksi.ojala@helsinki.fi

This article provides an overview of how aesthetics is treated in the current Finnish basic education core curriculum document. Relatively little research has been conducted on aesthetics in Finnish curricula, particularly from an interdisciplinary approach. In the broader picture, the position of aesthetics and the appreciation of arts subjects *in curricula* has paradoxically weakened globally over recent decades, particularly in English-speaking cultures. At the same time, the significance of aesthetics has increased in postmodern culture with, for instance, increasingly more commercial brands. Finland has a broad national core curriculum, and although aesthetics (as a school subject) is not officially part of it the traditional arts

subjects (arts, music, crafts), aspects of aesthetics are nevertheless involved in the curriculum. In this study, we investigate how aspects of aesthetics feature in the renewed Finnish curriculum text for basic education. Our analysis shows that only a few specific references to aesthetics can be found in the Finnish renewed curriculum. Conceptually, the lack of postmodern aesthetics is noticeable, particularly in the subject of art, where one can see features of it without the concept being explicitly mentioned. In order to successfully incorporate aesthetics into basic education curricula, we conclude that the subject needs to better reflect notions of participation, self-expression, and divergent thinking.

Key words: aesthetics, arts education, basic education, curriculum, Finnish education

1. Introduction

In Finland, the potential of aesthetics in education is seldom discussed today. This article provides an overview of aesthetics in the current Finnish basic education core curriculum document. In general, relatively little research has been conducted on aesthetics in the Finnish curriculum, particularly from an interdisciplinary approach. With this qualitative study, we aim to contribute to this particular arena.

In Finland, one of the key principles of basic education is equal access to high-quality education and training—the same educational opportunities should be available everyone regardless of ethnic origin, income, or location. The Finnish National Agency for Education (FNAE) and educational experts create in co-operation the curricula for every grade and level in the education system—pre-primary education, basic education, general upper secondary education as well as basic education in the arts, preparatory education for immigrants, and morning and afternoon activities for schoolchildren. The curricula of different grades are published in one volume and outlined in documents that contain key objectives, content, and educational policies. The idea is that the national core curriculum as a whole, concerning different grades, create a coherent, progressive continuum and provide a strong basis for lifelong learning (FNAE 2018). Based on the national curriculum, local education providers and schools create their own curricula.

Curriculum development is always associated with internal or external change in society. In the educational ecosystem worldwide, external reforms seem to be so frequent that some teachers feel they are trapped in a vortex of constant change. (Vahtivuori-Hänninen et al., 2014, 21)

EDUCARE

The existing Finnish curriculum was renewed at the end of 2014. Thereafter, in August 2016, new local curricula based on this core curriculum were implemented in schools and integrated in the teaching of all subjects (Vahtivuori-Hänninen et al., 2014). In an effort to equip the new generation with the skills to communicate in the digitized world, the new curriculum includes the strengthening of multi-literacy skills (e.g., Kallionpää, 2017).

The purpose of the core curriculum is to support and steer the provision of education and school work and promote the equal implementation of comprehensive and single-structure basic education. Most schools are publicly funded, and they follow the national core curriculum and its qualification requirements; however, the local curriculum plays an important role in steering the education as well as creating and implementing national targets. The local authorities also decide how much autonomy is passed to the schools, and the local education providers are responsible for practical teaching arrangement and quality. This gives much pedagogical autonomy to teachers, as they are able to choose the methods, materials, and detailed content of the teaching (FNAE 2018).

The new Finnish national core curriculum (FNCC, 2016) introduced interdisciplinary approaches as a way to develop broader holistic thinking. In this context of interdisciplinarity, we examine questions about what potential and options the new curricula for basic education (from Grades 1–9) enable or are left for aesthetics and how these can be considered and understood in the educational context. We briefly discuss the theoretical background, terms, challenges, and benefits of aesthetics in interdisciplinary learning approaches and consider the inter- and multidisciplinary approach of the Finnish curriculum as an option and potential for aesthetics in education. For some teachers, aesthetics means incorporating the Arts across the curriculum with a focus on aesthetic quality, whereas for others, aesthetics is a branch of philosophy and an entirely separate subject.

This leads to the question, why consider aesthetics if aesthetics as a school subject is not part of the Finnish curriculum? In light of the current era of digitalization, aesthetics is not one of the “hot topics” in discussions about schooling, curriculum, and the development of education. Nevertheless, aesthetics played an important role in the postmodern turn of the 1990s and it continues to be important in relation to postmodernism to this day. In this context, we draw from Scott Lash’s (1994, 186) idea of aesthetic. In particular, Lash’s concept of aesthetic reflexivity is useful when analyzing the aesthetical potential of the curriculum and current school

practices. Lash's view makes it possible to bring up principal questions of today's school culture: Is an aesthetic education still based on the old esoteric, modern Kantian definition, and if so, to what extent? Or, are there some features of a broader postmodern definition of the aesthetics of popular culture and everyday life? (comp. Lash 1994, 154.) In this paper, we focus on dimensions of the curriculum, and the research questions are widely based on the aforementioned broader questions. We presuppose that, in the contemporary school, the students' artwork reflects postmodern popular culture and everyday life—a notion which goes beyond the Kantian notion of aesthetics. Therefore, we ask whether the value of school works (given by the teachers) is, from the students' point of view, prominent enough and encouraged in postmodern Finnish schools. Moreover, this raises the question of whether there are enough possibilities in the renewed Finnish curricula to utilize the potential of the aesthetics of everyday life and popular culture.

2. The concept of aesthetics

The concept of aesthetics has many definitions, and it originates from a long tradition from antiquity—from ancient Greece to today's postmodern culture. In general, aesthetics has been defined as the science of sense perception and sensation of feeling and affective emotions (Reiners, Seppä & Vuorinen, 2009). In the Western world, the Kantian definition of aesthetics has dominated for almost the whole of the 20th century, but more recently, modernization has had such an influence that it also changed the more traditional definitions of aesthetics. One of the largest turning points was at the end of the Cold War in the beginning of the 1990s when the economical discourses of New Liberalism dominated different fields in societies all over the world. In Western industrialized societies in particular, the upheaval was so rapid and profound that scientists began to discuss the element of risk in the changes (Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994). Scholars claimed that 'revolution' was so rapid and strong that changes in industrialized societies often happen secretly in ignorance and in an unconscious way (Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994). According to Ulrich Beck (1994, 12–17), that process had a mostly unplanned reflexive character, and it led cultural change in the direction of a risk society. Beck (1994) called his analysis the "theory of reflexive modernization". In Beck's usage, *reflexive* refers to the way a human being is "meeting him/herself" in the confusing and puzzling situations of postmodern culture. In this sense, reflexive is not the same as reflection (i.e. deep, critical, conscious thinking within concepts) but rather the imaginal opposite of that (Beck 1994, 17).

EDUCARE

Scott Lash (1994) applied Beck's views when developing his aesthetic theory of the postmodern change. Lash pointed out that reflexive modernization also had an aesthetic quality. The change from the modern to postmodern condition added two dimensions to the discussion—the aesthetics of popular culture and the aesthetics of everyday life (Lash, 1994, p. 154). According to Lash, these two dimensions should be understood as a postmodern way of reflecting the attitude of esoteric-modern (Kantian) aesthetics to the consciousness of ordinary people (1994, 228). Lash gives an interpretation of how cultural change influenced people: When a human being attempts to clarify the new postmodern dimensions of the reality, there are no concepts in his or her mind in the beginning. Instead, there are aesthetic (emotional, affective) images that—within the economic basis of New Liberal postmodern change—appear, for instance, when people see new brands in the city (i.e. the aesthetics of everyday life). This resulted in postmodern culture challenging the foundations of modern culture. The consciousness of people was dominated by aesthetic sensations triggered by, for example, brands and other new elements of the postmodern condition. This 'changing' stage of the postmodern mind was not dominated by concepts but rather by aesthetic sensations and images, which is why Lash called it "reflexive modernization". Relating to this, Lash (1994, p. 186) calls his postmodern hermeneutics the "theory of aesthetic reflexivity".

Theoretical changes in the educational field were globally significant during the 1990s (e.g., with the rise of constructivism) but were not as widespread and quickly implemented in school practice. Instead, everything continued in much the same way as before (e.g., frontal instruction as the main pedagogical method). Although the practical changes were not overtly radical and implemented slowly, the postmodern change influenced school life, and this effect of mostly fruitful confusion (Siljander, 1988) has continued to today.

3. The position of aesthetics in the history of curriculum development

In the history of curricula, the position of aesthetics has changed considerably. In the first systematic curriculum in 1560, which contained many subjects, aesthetics did not have a role at all. However, the role of aesthetics increased with the presentation of a broad curriculum in the German *bildung* ideal during of the 1830s and the Russian *Oprasonanieje* (1840). In the United States, aesthetics featured heavily in John Dewey's educational philosophy, which was a staple in the pedagogical mainstream for two long periods during the 20th century (Autio, 2016; 2018).

The Sputnik Shock at the end of the 1950s displaced Dewey, and this changed U.S. pedagogy dramatically. In the time since the Coleman report (1966), the curriculum has avoided aesthetics, as few subjects (e.g., science, mathematics, and languages) and standardized testing dominated educational policy until today. In contrast, China has a 5000-year-old, rich cultural tradition which contains ethical and aesthetic aspects, yet the renewing of the Chinese curriculum in 1920 was fruitful. The only exception in this continuum was in 1949, when Mao took I.I. Kairov's standardized schooling system from the Soviet Union as China's leading model. The character of this system was more technical than aesthetic, and it was only planned for the service of the labor market. After Mao, the climate in China began to change in small steps, and the latest renewal in 2002 was a big victory, as it involved a broader curriculum with aesthetic values (Autio 2016).

After the end of Cold War (in particular, since the beginning of the 1990s), most Western countries have, followed the New Liberal school policy of the United States and Great Britain. This policy was developed during the 1980s under the Reagan and Thatcher administrations and was based on the technical view of the Coleman Report (1966). The main features are the principle of avoiding aesthetic and humanistic subjects and focusing more on math and languages. Internationally, the only long-term exceptions have been Finland, Singapore, and a few provinces in Canada that have broader curricula (Autio 2016). One recent member of this group is New Zealand, which abandoned the old strategy in 2018 by starting a new broader curriculum with national and cultural subjects and traditions (Thrupp, 2018). In the next section, we analyze in more detail the new Finnish curriculum (2014) enacted in 2016.

4. Renewed Finnish curriculum for basic education

As mentioned, the new Finnish national curriculum introduced interdisciplinary approaches as a possibility for developing broader holistic thinking. As this article provides an overview of aesthetics in the current Finnish basic education core curriculum, three curriculum dimensions are examined: multidisciplinary learning modules, transversal competencies, and arts subjects.

4.1 Multidisciplinary learning modules

According to the curriculum, every school must have at least one multidisciplinary implementation each school year. This implementation can be a clearly-defined theme, project, or course that combines the content of different subjects and deals with the selected theme from the perspective of several subjects. The idea is that schools plan their multidisciplinary learning

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modules according to local needs and interests, and the students participate in planning the modules, themes and duration.

4.2 Transversal competencies

Transversal competencies reflect the demands of a changing society for new skills and competences. According to the curriculum, transversal competencies incorporate each school subject as it is taught, studied, and assessed as part of the different subjects. The seven transversal competences (in the new Finnish curriculum) are thinking and learning to learn, cultural competence, interaction and self-expression, taking care of oneself and managing daily life, multiliteracy, ICT competence, working life competence and entrepreneurship, and participation, involvement and building a sustainable future.

4.3 Arts and skills subjects

Given all the arts and skills subjects, having a compulsory status in the Finnish curriculum (even if this means a limited number of lessons for some arts subjects) is rather unique in the European context (Kairavuori & Sintonen, 2016). As Kairavuori and Sintonen (2016) explain:

This uniqueness could be partly explained from a social perspective: art and culture education in Finland is strongly influenced by individual freedom acts and laws; these freedoms are stated in the Constitution. The most important constitutional rights from the point of view of arts education are freedom of expression (also relating to people's self-expression) and freedom of the arts. Young people engaged with the arts and the personal experiences and values of art making are more likely to be an integral part of a communicative society and to culturally develop as individuals. (p. 155)

In Finland, teachers are given considerable responsibility and have much trust placed in them because the national core curriculum and local curriculum offer only broad guidelines and national tests do not measure teachers' success (Sahlberg, 2015). This "culture of trust" means that Finnish teachers have the freedom to decide how to implement versatile ideals and goals introduced in the curricula (Autio 2017).

Given that there may be 20 or 30 students in the classroom at the same time, this freedom can also raise questions, as Kallio (2015) has also pointed out. Finnish teachers may wonder how they can nurture their students' creativity and interaction, while at the same time, take the students'

different orientations and aesthetic preferences into account (Finnish National Board of Education, 2015).

One solution is to integrate different school subjects. According to our previous research (Karppinen et al., 2013), broader interdisciplinary themes open up the potential for tacit information and shared creative views and opinions. It is often the case that, although these themes are not easy to see in the planning of the teaching, they appear during learning processes where different school subjects are integrated. When the themes of different subjects become integrated in pedagogical activities, the students have the opportunity to present themselves as “experts” of different fields (biology, geography, history, art subjects, etc.). They can also show their extra knowledge to the other students (and the teacher) via peer teaching and learning, because the “expertise” they lean on comes from, for instance, their long-standing hobbies.

However, as Kairavuori and Sintonen (2016) argue, in Finnish schools, for example, the capability and willingness for transformation within each arts subject is also one of the vital elements behind “the success story”—a good quality education. According to them, by honoring the tradition and heritage, the school system is not setting too rigid frames for reading the world, and in the reading processes, diverse cultural and creative texts and situations are valued.

5. Research questions, method and analysis

Two research questions underpin this study:

- a) How is the term ‘aesthetics’ featured, used, and defined in the renewed Finnish curriculum document for basic education, and what features of the broader postmodern definition of aesthetics appear in it?
- b) What options and potential does the renewed curriculum offer for aesthetics in school arts education?

Our method features qualitative content text analysis (Finfgeld-Connett, 2014; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) and reflective reading. The content analysis enables us to analytically read the curriculum document (473 pages), and the reflective close reading brings all the remarks into a process of sharing. In this study, *reflective close reading* refers to the dialogical process of four researchers, in which each reader brought her or his findings and remarks into a shared dialogue and discussions. Thereafter, the content analysis focused on a qualitative and critical close reading of

EDUCARE

the curricula (Schreier, 2012). This involved three phases: a) reading and annotating the text, b) looking for repetition, contradictions, and similarities, and c) reflecting the notations. The reflective close reading was then continued in a team as a shared and reflective writing process, with each writer representing one's own specialized area of the school subjects (visual art, drama, music, media).

The analysis led us to the three-dimensional thematic construction of aesthetics with a special interest in a) the underlying values of basic education, b) the operating culture, and c) integrative instruction and multidisciplinary learning. However, we do not think that the curricula directly reflect today's society and cultures, but rather they are written in the social reality and they reflect society's strategic intent. In addition, we acknowledge that focusing on the usage of the term 'aesthetic' in a curriculum document is not meant to encompass the whole of its pedagogical potential but rather mainly serves to orientate the indications of aesthetics in the text of the basic education curriculum.

5.1 The findings from the renewed curriculum document

In this section, we demonstrate how aesthetics is featured in the renewed Finnish curriculum and what aesthetic experiences the curriculum enables in primary and upper secondary school education. We summarize our findings from three points of view: the underlying values of basic education, the operating culture, and integrative instruction/multidisciplinary learning.

The underlying values of basic education are explained in the curriculum document as the values that guide the preparation of the new national curriculum. They are explained in four parts: The first is the uniqueness of each pupil and right to a good education; the second refers to humanity, general knowledge and ability, as well as equality and democracy; the third refers to cultural diversity; and the fourth is about a sustainable way of living (pp. 48–54). In this section, there is only one reference to aesthetic issues: The curriculum states that “the perspectives of ethics and aesthetics guide the pupils to think about what is valuable in life” (pp. 50–51) in conjunction with humanity, general knowledge and ability, and equality and democracy.

In the curriculum, the idea of the operation culture underlines the significance of the development of the school culture so that important part of the development is to consider the impacts of the school culture and recognizing and rectifying its undesirable features (p. 93). However, aesthetics is connected to this only in terms of learning environments:

In the development, planning, implementation and use of facility solutions for basic education, factors to be accounted for include ergonomics, ecological qualities, aesthetics, accessibility and acoustic conditions, as well as the lightning, indoor air quality, comfort, order and tidiness of the premises. (p. 107)

From this point of view, aesthetics is comprehended as a given element or a set feature in a learning environment (clean tables, etc.) instead of the lived, shared experience of a learning community.

This lack of broader utilization of aesthetics can be seen as a feature of the Western “fitness” of the core curriculum (to a smaller number of subjects), which has been expanding for several decades. This has happened in two bigger phases. First, in the United States after the Sputnik Shock at the end of 1950s and after the Coleman (1966) Report. The second bigger phase started after the end of the Cold War, and this tendency is reflected in actions such as decreasing the number of art subject hours, for example. This can be seen as a problem because the broader utilization of aesthetics is a way to develop deep thinking, philosophical morality, etc. (Autio 2016).

Among seven transversal competencies mentioned in the curriculum, the term ‘aesthetic’ is included in three: cultural competence, interaction and self-expression, and multiliteracy. Interestingly, the term aesthetic has been left out from transversal competence areas such as the idea of taking care of oneself and managing daily life, working life competence and entrepreneurship, ICT competence, and participation, involvement, and building a sustainable future. Building a sustainable future, in particular, could also include aesthetic perspectives within environmental issues, but the curriculum document does not drive these issues in that direction. This is confusing, because the development of human morality (as deeper thinking) within aesthetic discourses could be fruitful when solving challenges of environment problems now and especially in the near future (Autio 2016).

According to the curriculum, cultural competence as a transversal competence refers to cultural, linguistic, religious, and philosophical diversity, acting in a diverse environment with respect for human rights (p. 73). In this section, the curriculum text states, “The pupils are guided to act in a manner that promotes aesthetics values in their environment and to enjoy their various manifestations” (pp. 75–76). The curriculum suggests supporting learning where “the pupils learn to look at issues from the perspectives of other people’s life situations and circumstances. Learning together across the boundaries of languages, cultures, religions and beliefs creates a

EDUCARE

setting for genuine interaction and communality” (p. 52.) In this part, aesthetics is connected to the multiculturalism and diversity as if they would manifest aesthetics intrinsically. In addition, the idea of having someone (a teacher?) guiding students “to act in a manner that promotes aesthetics values” indicates intrinsically designated, not discussed and reconstructed shared aesthetic values.

From a multiliteracy viewpoint, the curriculum explains that “multiliteracy supports the development of critical thinking and learning skills. While developing it, the pupils also discuss and reflect ethical and aesthetic questions” (p. 79). In this section, aesthetics is connected to critical thinking and learning skills in the same way that aesthetics is specified in the section on thinking and learning that is meant for Grades 1 and 2 (from ages 6–8): “The development of memory, imagination, and ethical and aesthetic thinking is supported with fairy tales and stories, games, nurse rhymes, songs, play, different art forms, and diverse interaction” (pp. 394–395). During the later school years (Grades 7–9), the same connection of aesthetics and thinking to learning to learn is explained: “The development of ethical thinking is supported by reflecting on right and wrong, good life and virtues, and the principles of ethical way of living. The arts deepen ethical and aesthetic thinking by stirring emotions and creating new inventive ideas“ (p. 1240). The curriculum continues (in the section on cultural competence, interaction, and self-expression, p. 1241), “Plenty of opportunities for creative activity are included to school work. The pupils are encouraged to promote aesthetic values and to enjoy the various forms of aesthetics.” The idea of aesthetics seems to be mainly rooted in a (teacher’s) modeled world, where aesthetic content is given to the students instead of a lived or produced process.

The curriculum specifies the learning tasks, the objectives, and the content areas for each school subject separately. In addition, the curriculum states that, within each subject, the objectives that concern the particular perspectives related to learning environments, working methods, guidance, differentiation and support are defined. When the curriculum document is scrutinized from the perspective of the different school subjects, specific mentions of ‘aesthetic’ can be found in the following areas:

Grades 1–6:

Native language and literature: “Drama strengthens the functional, experimental, and aesthetic nature of the subject [Finnish]” (p. 415).

Music: “The pupil’s creative thinking and aesthetic and musical understanding are promoted by providing them with opportunities to compose and perform musical ideas and to use their imagination and creativity both independently and together with others” (p. 601).

Visual Arts: “The development of expression skills and aesthetic abilities is supported by coordination between different senses and the whole body.” (p. 612).

Crafts: “Guide the pupil to design and produce craft products or pieces with confidence in his or her own aesthetic and technical decisions” (p. 626).

Physical education: “Versative play, exercises, and games that give the pupils experiences of participation, self-efficacy, independence, self-expression and aesthetics are used in teaching and learning” (p. 1217).

Grades 7–9:

Home economics: “Practical work skills: to guide the pupil to practice manual skills needed in managing the household and to encourage him or her to be creative and to pay attention to aesthetics” (p. 1999).

In consideration of aesthetics, the renewed Finnish curriculum seems to be based on the more traditional definition of esoteric-modern aesthetics rather than the postmodern definition of it. One can hardly see any features of the broader postmodern definition of aesthetics of popular culture and everyday life in the curriculum text. For example, aesthetics is represented as a value for a good life without any mention or explanation of what is a “good life” entails—certainly not from the students’ point of view. In addition, the findings show that the curriculum provides guidance in relation to aesthetic events and performances (aiming for beauty and a good life, promoting aesthetic values) rather than for students’ aesthetic processes and reflections including, for example, experiencing, analyzing, and conceptualizing aesthetics. It is also notable that, among different school subjects, aesthetic events are characterized in various ways and defined from different angles: in crafts as ‘aesthetic decisions’, in home economics as ‘paying attention’, in visual art as ‘development of aesthetic abilities’, in music as ‘promoting aesthetic understanding’, in PE as ‘gained experiences’, and in native language as an ‘aesthetic nature’. This mirrors a loose usage of the term, and some possible randomness in its allocation.

EDUCARE

6. Reflections: Aesthetics in the curriculum and the interdisciplinarity approach in the teaching

In this study, we investigated if aesthetics is featured in the renewed Finnish curriculum text for basic education, and if so, how? We started from the roots of aesthetics as a phenomenon and as a term, that is, from aesthetics as sense perception and sensation as well as a value-driven dialogue within the human mind and between human cultures, which suggests that perception or its object is aesthetic in nature. We also argued that constant changes in society and cultures strongly influence the understanding and valuing of aesthetics and the ways it is reflected in school curriculum. Therefore, we examined the question of postmodern change in aesthetics, in particular, if and how this paradigm shift was realized in the contexts when the concept of aesthetics was referred to in the most recent Finnish curriculum texts.

For example, in the subject of music, popular music appears to offer a fruitful point of departure for postmodern music learning. However, one may argue that the aesthetics of much popular music exists in an “apparent contrast with the aims and values of formal education” (Kallio, 2015 p. i). Gracyk (2004) points out that, particularly during the teenage years, “an individual’s relationship to music plays a profound role in the formation of the very idea of self-identity” (p. 9; see also Ruthmann & Dillon, 2012). Thus, according to Kallio (2015), “If teacher[s] decide to exclude certain popular music from the school classroom as offensive or inappropriate, it may send students the message that ‘your music is not welcome in school, and accordingly, neither are you’” (p. i).

The rise of postmodern society has put pressure on schools to adapt learning that “involves real-world problems and projects that are relevant to the learner (Traxler, 2007, p. 7). Against this backdrop, it is natural that music educators are increasingly integrating their students’ “own” music into the music classroom (Georgii-Hemming & Westvall, 2010; Green, 2008). Nevertheless, several writers have pointed out that music education tends to build its own musical practices, which may be sonically and aesthetically irrelevant to the students’ lives outside school (Paynter, 1982; Regelski, 2004; Swanwick, 1999; Tagg, 1982). An unwanted outcome of such practices may be the creation of a specific genre of “school music”—music that may not appear to the student as relevant at all (Georgii-Hemming & Westvall, 2010; Lindgren & Ericsson, 2010; Väkevä, 2010). The aesthetic essence of school music may not be the same essence that students recognize in music.

In the United States, according to MacDonald (2006a), current trends in contemporary art education that were previously based mainly on discipline-based art education now invoke postmodernism in the curriculum. In the United Kingdom, there seems to be relatively little emphasis on postmodernism. However, we argue that in the renewed Finnish curriculum, the postmodernism paradigm is clearly expressed in the context of visual arts as a school subject. According to the renewed curriculum (FNCC 2016), the main aim of the visual arts is to investigate the plural cultural reality through the Arts, and the emphasis on teaching–learning processes is on young learners’ own visual cultures, critical understanding, and participation in society. These aims are clear starting points in art education that position aesthetics in line with the postmodern paradigm which celebrates cultural pluralism, contextual narratives, and relative values instead of esoteric ‘high art’ or isolated ‘school art’ studies. This also falls in line with our finding that ‘aesthetic’ as a word has almost disappeared in the context of the visual arts, having only one mention in the text. As perhaps a paradoxical conclusion, aesthetics as a term might not be needed in a central role when defining the postmodern paradigm of aesthetics, as it still may seem too linked to the modernism paradigm of aesthetics in the school context. Whether this is the state of current teaching practices in the visual arts is another question, as pointed out in the case of music education.

Interestingly, the only mention of ‘aesthetic’ as a term in the context of the visual arts as a school subject was linked to abilities in conjunction with different senses and the whole body. This opens up for other discussions—what is, or could be, the position of aesthetics in the most recent curriculum? And whether the postmodern paradigm shift was realized in the textual context, and if so, how? This means asking, for example, if everyday life or popular culture has aesthetic potential for “meeting him/ herself in confusing, puzzling situations of postmodern culture”, as a reflexive person does according to Beck’s (1994, 12–17) theory. Considering the emphasis on the curriculum, and in particular, on multidisciplinary and integrated modules within multimodal teaching-learning processes in all school subjects, we conclude that the potential for the aesthetic approach in inquiring and understanding the world is wide open and fruitful. These multimodal and multidisciplinary (in the sense of culturally plural) learning entities can be seen as a laboratory for the (postmodern) aesthetic approach to general (scientific and artistic) themes. They are attempts to integrate the perceptions and knowledge students construct in and through various disciplines, between senses and the whole body, and they are actively linked with the students’ own interests, questions, and understandings of their everyday lives.

EDUCARE

Interestingly, the most recent curriculum (FNCC 2016) introduces the expression “different ways of knowing” when discussing the idea of multimodality in learning. Here, we find the aesthetic approach connected to the postmodern conception of knowledge building—the move from sensory experiences and expression to thought processes—much in the way arts and science did in the postmodern paradigm shift (MacDonald 2006b; Danvers 2006). The classical expressions for describing knowing as “to know by senses” or “to know by mind” is in active dialogue in this kind of aesthetic learning. This is where drawing, painting, or other visual constructs may have diverse functions as a multimodally sensed feature and conceptualized understanding or knowledge of the inquired phenomena.

The renewed Finnish curriculum text for basic education highlights the multimodality in all school learning, even though, according to our findings, it is not often connected to the word aesthetic directly. However, in the context of multiliteracy, the curriculum links the development of critical thinking and learning skills with discussing and reflecting ethical and aesthetic questions (FNCC 2016). Moreover, we argue that the integration between senses and the whole body in multimodal learning and knowledge building is the very essence of the aesthetic dialogue within the human mind and cultures. In the aesthetic experience, the multimodal sensation is connected to feelings and values, which are known as powerful dimensions in teaching–learning processes. If the different ways of knowing and multimodal knowledge building are taken seriously, then the roots of the aesthetic experience and critical judgment in young learners’ everyday life, stand at the core of learning multidisciplinary modules. Taken together, this has huge potential for aesthetic learning, even though it is not yet written as such conceptually in the curriculum document.

7. Conclusions

As mentioned, little research has examined the role of aesthetics in Finnish curricula. This perhaps reflects the theoretical and practical challenges of the ‘difficult’ character of the postmodern turn and the unpopularity of aesthetics themes in recent discussions. In the theoretical framework, we argued that major and constant change in society and cultures strongly influence the importance of understanding and valuing aesthetics and thus how aesthetics is reflected in school curricula. Therefore, we raise the question of postmodern change in aesthetics—specifically, whether this paradigm shift was realized in the contexts where the concept of aesthetics was used in the latest Finnish curriculum texts, and if so, how? In

answering our first research question, we show in the analysis that there are only a few specific mentions of aesthetics in the Finnish renewed curricula. In addition, within art subject descriptions, one can find features of postmodern aesthetics without any explicit mention of the concept.

Our analysis answers the second research question of how to define aesthetics in the context of the Finnish national curriculum. Regarding present and future challenges within education, one potential solution would be to better utilize aesthetics that reflect participation, expression, and divergent thinking. If practices were based on these qualities, we argue that they would allow the integration of the individual in which each human being could draw from their own aesthetic capacity. In addition, the aforementioned practices are easily supported by collaborative contributions, and the options for aesthetics and the potential of these can be understood as shared.

However, as our study demonstrates, in the renewed curriculum, features of the broader postmodern definition of aesthetics seldom appear in the national document (2014). The concept of postmodern aesthetics is totally missing. This can be a problem for the teachers because without the concept it is more difficult to understand the postmodern change within aesthetics—there is a gap between modern (Kantian) aesthetics and the postmodern notion of aesthetics. This situation raises the question, would the pedagogical influence be much richer if the conceptual understanding concerning postmodern change was also visible?

We presuppose that the artwork of students falls in line with the postmodern notion more than the Kantian notion of aesthetics. Therefore, we ask whether the value of school works (given by the teachers) is, from the students' point of view, prominent enough and encouraged in postmodern Finnish schools. Moreover, in the renewed Finnish curricula (2014), is there enough space for the aesthetics of everyday life and popular culture? As mentioned, in aesthetics, this means a paradigm shift from modernism to postmodernism, which could also be found in the curriculum text. At the heart of supporting students aesthetic reflexivity and engagements with aesthetics and learning about aesthetics are rich textual environments that encourage school students to investigate, conceptualize, produce, share, and make meaning.

As stated, curriculum development is always associated with internal or external change in society. When the character of the postmodern change has been quite aesthetic, it is curious that aesthetics as a concept plays so small a role in the renewed Finnish national core curriculum. At least the postmodern change from Kantian aesthetic to popular and everyday aesthetics would be

EDUCARE

described in curriculum. Now there is a contradiction: the appreciation and position of aesthetics is small, although the importance of understanding the concept has increased a lot during the last decades because of the strong emergence of postmodern aesthetics.

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